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# Looking for health data on Internet has its pitfalls

## Not all information is accurate and some refers to foreign sources: book

By Rebecca Wigod
SOUTHAM NEWSPAPERS
*Vancouver*

Health information is often what people go looking for when they surf the Internet.

It's the third most sought-after kind of information, after computer and entertainment lore, according to Jim Carroll and Rick Broadhead.

The two, who have written 18 books about the Internet, have brought out a manual alerting Canadians to the benefits and pitfalls of combing it for health information.

On one hand, the Internet puts an unprecedented wealth of medical lore into the hands of ordinary consumers, they write in Good Health Online (Prentice Hall Canada, paperback, $16.95).

On the other hand, it presents numerous risks. Consumers may glean fraudulent information, chase leads that don't apply in Canada or come away with misdiagnoses.

> *"The Internet is full of fraud artists, con men, shady corporations, dishonest medical professionals and other forms of lowlife."*
>
> Authors Jim Carroll and Rick Broadhead

Carroll used the Internet himself for a health problem. At the beginning of this year, he was stricken with Bell's palsy, a temporary inflammation of the facial nerve that causes one side of the face to droop.

The authors describe how he quickly accessed a forum on Bell's palsy and numerous Web sites and discussion groups. He contacted many other people who had experienced Bell's palsy - an instant linkage that would have been impossible until recently.

Four hours after sitting down at the computer, he was armed with a remarkable amount of information - so much that, when he went to see his doctor, he was able to have a two-way conversation instead of "the typical one-way overview."

But the value of information gleaned from the Internet is offset by an equal number of pitfalls, Carroll and Broadhead say. Stating their concerns in the strongest possible terms, they point out that the Internet is full of "fraud artists, con men, shady corporations, dishonest medical professionals and other forms of lowlife." People who don't use it wisely can end up making wrong decisions and wasting their time.

They warn that one of the chief dangers, when patients mine the Internet for nuggets of information about their health problems, is alienating their doctors. Only 20 per cent of Canadian health care professionals are on line.

The authors advise that the cyber-literate patient educate his or her doctor, rather than go shopping for a new one.

Jim Carroll